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Bay will bounce back, say officials

By Steve Urbon, Standard-Times senior correspondent

The occasional tar ball isn't going to close the beaches of Buzzards Bay this summer, in the view of federal environmental officials who came to New Bedford yesterday to outline their environmental assessment plan for the April 27 oil spill. Frank G. Csulak, northeast regional science coordinator for the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, said the effects of the April 27 spill of 98,000 gallons of No. 6 oil will last indefinitely. But in many ways, the use of Buzzards Bay will largely return to normal, he said.

About half of the 180,000 acres of shellfish beds already have been inspected, found clean, and reopened. Mr. Csulak met with The Standard-Times after a two-hour hearing at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, hosted by Sen. Mark C.W. Montigny, D-New Bedford, and representatives of Sen. John F. Kerry, D-Mass. The public session was convened to explain the years-long natural resource damage assessment, or NRDA, that began within days of the spill. Many local officials and environmentalists stayed through the presentation, but half of their questions concerned the accident, the cleanup and the policies, not the assessment process.

The assessment is a different process than the cleanup, which is still in progress. Steve Lehmann, NOAA's science coordinator for the spill, compared it to a medical situation in which the cleanup team is the emergency room doctor and the assessment team is the internist concerned with long-term patient care. Mr. Csulak and other officials of NOAA and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service outlined the steps being taken to gather environmental information, along with any and all data about public use of Buzzards Bay, to map out a master plan for restoring it using money to come from the "responsible party," Bouchard Transportation Co. Done jointly with state officials and with other representatives with an interest in the bay, the result will be very similar to the New Bedford Harbor Trust established to repair the damage done by PCB pollution. The NOAA process for Buzzards Bay will result in a series of actions that might very closely resemble the environmental steps taken to rebuild the New Bedford Harbor environment.

Mr. Csulak repeatedly pointed out that the NOAA survey is aimed at the public resource, and that individual and commercial restitution will come out of the claims process already under way. In response to a question, he said that no recreational shellfisherman will be compensated under the program. That and all commercial losses are handled by the claims process.

The NOAA study will look at recreational losses, however, including boating, bathing, fishing and shellfishing. The team will gather such data as shellfishing licenses to detect the changes. Other sources might be beach parking receipts or other records kept by local communities. There might be aerial surveys of the population of beachgoers, to see how many are kept away by the prospect of encountering some residual oil. Mr. Csulak said

the urgent job now is the collection of "ephemeral data," the "perishable" information on such things as bird deaths, shellfish oiling and beach contamination. He sharply disputed a Standard-Times editorial of June 8 that warned against "skimping" on such efforts, pointing out that all the various agencies serving as trustees are seeing to it that they are getting all the information they are going to need.

Later in the process, he said, the trustees will decide what scientific models can be used to interpret that data to predict the overall effects of the spill on the bay environment. Lisa Pelstring, NOAA's director of public involvement for the spill, said the damage survey and the remediation plan cannot be used to go beyond the effects of the spill. "There has to be a link between the injury and the remediation project," she told The Standard-Times, foreclosing the chance that the study could be used to leverage a more ambitious environmental project.

"The restoration project is proportionate to the size of the injury," she said. Mr. Csulak said Bouchard will have the option of performing the remediation work itself, or choosing to "cash out" and allow the trustees to manage the work, which will likely take several years once the decisions are made.